



American Society of Church History

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Source: *Church History*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Mar., 1999), pp. 42-61

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Society of Church History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3170109>

Accessed: 29/06/2010 00:09

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What Children Did Not Learn in School: The Intellectual Quickening of Young Americans in the Nineteenth Century

R. LAURENCE MOORE

Thomas Jefferson belonged to a generation of common-sense rationalists who hoped that religious tolerance in the United States would put an end to religious quarreling. Once freed to practice religion as they pleased, adult citizens, Jefferson thought, would recognize the moral advantages of nondogmatic creeds and treat religion as a philosophical inquiry based not on Scripture but on what was self-evidently true. Religion, a subject for mature minds who could weigh evidence, was not for infants. Young children, he said, were "at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious enquiries."¹ Children had to learn to think about religion gradually and to study it with a questioning mind only after they had attained adulthood.

Jefferson's attitude about protecting young children from storms raised by religious divisiveness was in many ways incorporated into the philosophy of America's system of nineteenth-century public schools. This is a point we shall return to in a concluding section. However, what interests us in the bulk of this essay is the important ways Jefferson was wrong. He was wrong in imagining that the United States in the early nineteenth century was about to enter a period marked by religious consensus. And he was wrong to think that American children would somehow be able to ignore religion and to gain nothing positive from living in a period that spawned a proliferation of religious opinion and loyalties. In fact, religion was a crucial element in the intellectual awakening of young minds in the nineteenth century. Thinking in nineteenth-century America often began

A substantially different version of this essay was delivered as the Barney L. Jones Lecture in American Christianity at Duke University in 1996. For their hospitality and comments then, I especially want to thank Hans Hillerbrand, Grant Wacker, and Kate Joyce.

1. Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 149.

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Church History 68:1 (March 1999)

with thinking about religion, in wondering about God's ways and learning to ask questions about them. Religious controversies posed just about the only issues that started young minds racing. They set the first intellectual arenas of doubt and uncertainty, the first stimulants to logical reasoning, the first opportunity for youthful rebellion. Religion had, culturally speaking, intellectual quickening power, and, as we shall argue, shaped American intellectual life, not by producing certainty, but by provoking doubt.

We are talking about contentious religion, the recognition of difference and the habit of taking it seriously. In the nineteenth century the excitement of religious controversy began within families, churches, and Sunday schools. In almost equally significant ways, it was the background noise of nineteenth-century American culture, highbrow and lowbrow. With the post-Revolutionary development of American religious pluralism and the market models that American religious denominations had to adopt as a result of church disestablishment, Americans developed a taste for religious controversy that in many ways structured the emerging popular culture.² Throughout the nineteenth century, evangelicals and nonevangelicals, believers and nonbelievers, Protestants and Catholics expended enormous energy accentuating the values and beliefs that separated them. They competed for public attention with mesmerists, spiritualists, phrenologists, and a rich assortment of prophets who saw the United States as the site chosen by God to usher in the millennium. Few defended religious controversy as a good thing, but very little else had as much influence on nineteenth-century American intellectual life.

I. THE TWIG IS BENT: POLEMIC DIVINITY AND THE SHAPING OF THE INTELLECT

Jefferson, whatever he hoped, was no stranger to bitter religious controversy. Nor were many of his peers. The simultaneous resistance to religious controversy, and delight in it, was a key aspect of Enlightenment thought in the late eighteenth century. It especially shaped the career of one famous American philosophe, Benjamin Franklin. In a well-known passage in his *Autobiography*, Franklin, a precocious reader, recalled that "[m]y father's little library consisted chiefly of books in polemic divinity, most of which I read, and have often since regretted that, at a time when I had such a thirst for knowledge, more proper works had not fallen in my way, since it was now resolved I should not

2. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 118–45 and passim. E. Brooks Holifield, "Theology as Entertainment: Oral Debate in American Religion," *Church History* 67 (1998): 499–520.

be a clergyman."³ Franklin, a tenth son, was originally slated to be tithed to a career in the church, a parental aim formed because people agreed that the young boy would be a good scholar.

The young Franklin learned about religion at home, in church, and by reading his father's books in "polemic divinity." The latter, he said, he disliked because religious quarreling was pointless. When he attended church as an adult, and he often did, he complained that ministers spent their time trying to turn people into good Presbyterians rather than into good people. To overcome the effects of useless theological disputation, the adult Franklin found "useful" "moral" reading, what was lacking in his father's library, primarily in books of history. "The general natural tendency of reading good history must be to fix in the minds of youth deep impressions of the beauty and usefulness of virtue of all kinds, publick spirit, fortitude."⁴ Yet Franklin made his way in the world by becoming, among other things, a brilliant polemicist. His first training in how to argue was his encounter with his father's books in polemic divinity. However much he later dismissed the bulk of organized Christianity as useless argument, however much the fine points of theology bored him, the divines who most influenced him were troublemakers. Cotton Mather, a man who we might think would become one of the chief targets of Franklin's anticlerical comments, was one of them. When Franklin returned to Boston for a visit, Mather was one of the few people he wanted to see.⁵

In this connection, we should also remember Franklin's later famous friendship and business association with George Whitefield, a preacher whose religious doctrines were anathema to Franklin but who in Franklin's mind understood that the purpose of religion was to inspire human beings to "do good." Whitefield's preaching had the added advantage of overturning what in Franklin's mind were the staid and boring practices of most ministers in England and the colonies. Franklin applauded not Whitefield's views on Christian salvation, but the controversy he stirred. To say that Franklin moved beyond the polemic divinity of his father's library tells only part of the story since in publishing Whitefield he published the most controversial religious figure of his generation. Franklin regarded polemic divinity as in

3. Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1944), 16.

4. Benjamin Franklin, *Proposals for the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: William L. Clements Library, 1927).

5. Franklin recalled that one of Mather's books, *Bonifacius, an Essay upon the Good, that is to be Devised and Designed by Those Who Desire the Answer to the Great End of Life, and to do Good While They Live* (later shortened to "Essays to Do Good"), "perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life." One result was the essays of Silas Dogood. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 16.

substance useless, but as a matter of intellectual style it helped prepare him to become a leader of the American Revolution.

In the nineteenth century this basic pattern repeated itself with many variations. Consider, for example, Richard Ely and Washington Gladden who both became prominent figures in the Social Gospel movement and who were instrumental in the formation of the reformist American Economic Association in 1885. Ely, who grew up in Fredonia, New York, remembered that "neighbors fought bitterly on matters of creed. Religious beliefs were hotly argued over and all day visits were devoted to discussions of foreordination and predestination, immersion or sprinkling, infant baptism, eternal damnation, etc." These controversies, he noted, played a large role in his childhood and life.⁶ Gladden's summation of his early life in a farm community in the 1840s is equally attentive to the lively controversies of his youth. "My early childhood," he wrote, "had been bathed in an atmosphere of piety" ("the one deepest interest of my life through all that period was religion"). Fierce sectarian jealousies expressed by ministers of different churches who were "hardly on speaking terms" set his mind to wondering about "tangled and troublesome" problems.⁷

What is especially notable in these accounts is the attention to religion as a contentious or perplexing issue, a puzzle, as something to argue about and to lay awake worrying about.⁸ The same emphasis can be found in accounts remembering girlhood. Lucy Larcom filled her celebrated New England memoirs with thoughts about the religious influences of her early years. Including the biblical lessons of "Aunt Hannah," who taught "all the little ones" in a room above her father's shop ("Aunt Hannah's schoolroom and 'our shop' are a blended memory to me"), her religious experience was shaped primarily in her family circle and in church. In the latter, she gained the love of hymns—"committing them to memory"—that gave her whatever talent she had as a poet.

Larcom suggests that much of the theological discussion she heard as a child "meant little or nothing" to her and that "it was a pity that we were expected to begin thinking upon hard subjects so soon." Nonetheless, however disagreeable it might have been to listen to sermons with long words such as "dispensation, decrees, ordinances,

6. Richard T. Ely, *Ground under Our Feet: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 13–14.

7. Washington Gladden, *Recollections* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 32–36.

8. One line in Gladden's autobiography has many echoes in other accounts: "That little unplastered room under the rafters in the old farmhouse, where I lay so many nights . . . looking out through the casement upon the unpitying stars . . . a soul in great perplexity and trouble because it could not find God." Gladden, *Recollections*, 36.

covenants," she remembers the thinking, the words, and the stimulus to her imagination. She persisted in making "my own private interpretations of the Bible readings," despite being puzzled by the laughter of adults in reacting to her thoughts. At every turn in her life religion prompted her to find ways of educating herself. It posed "hard subjects," but it mattered.⁹

It did as well to Frances Willard, the woman who turned the Woman's Christian Temperance Union into a major political force in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1850s when Willard at the age of 14 first left home to attend a district school, she encountered a great deal of religion during the school day. Her first teacher, a Professor Hode, started the session by reading the first chapter of Mark and having the children sing hymns. In another school, her Aunt Sarah served as a model of a "devout Christian." Since "all her lessons led toward God," Aunt Sarah quite naturally used the Bible as a textbook in astronomy.¹⁰ These religious experiences extended into her college education at Northwestern Female Academy in Evanston, Illinois, where she asked her instructors pointed questions about the basis of faith.

However, Willard's religious curiosity had begun long before she started school as a teenager. "It was intuitive with me to seek for causes and for reasons. My faith faculty was not naturally strong. . . . Mother was surprised at my inquiries and called me playfully . . . her little infidel." Although she noted that her family did not attend church regularly and that she did not like it "when adults talked religion," such talk, as was true for Larcom, prompted her "to doubt and question." "The best religion of a theoretical kind" came to her at home "during our Sunday hour of song." Her earliest reading came from the Sunday school library, and on her own she "committed many chapters of Gospels to memory." From the vantage point of her secure Christian adulthood, Willard made it clear that she became what she was because religion, a constant but questioned subject, made her an "inquirer."¹¹

Frederick Law Olmsted, the American landscape architect who lived next door to Horace Bushnell as a child and whose life involved many close friendships with clergymen, recalled less than fondly the succession of ministers his father placed him with as a boy. His Sunday school teachers fared worse in his memoirs: "I was for the most part turned over for what is commonly called religious instruction to

9. Lucy Larcom, *New England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889), 9, 48–49, 55, 74, 101–103.

10. Frances Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago: H. J. Smith, 1889), 79, 93.

11. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years*, 6–8, 29, 112, 119–21.

Sunday school teachers, that is to say vain, ignorant, and conceited big boys and girls—parrots or quacks at the business.” Even so, what he recalled of his naive and childish religious views indicate how strongly religion affected his young imagination. He tried by prayer to raise a young girl who had died. Caught up in a revival, he held a prayer party in his bedroom to pray for the conversion of his father and then urged his father “to read a certain tract, the title of which I forget.”¹² This is the sort of child who in his twenties would write members of his family asking, “I’d like to know what you think of Baptism. What’s the use of it to babies? Is it not a ‘means of grace?’ And if it is, what is that but the beginning of the ‘work of Sanctification?’”¹³

The precocious child in the nineteenth century knew his or her Bible. Daniel Webster recalled that he could not recollect “a time when I could not read the Bible.” He learned to read and talk about religion at home. At age 12 he could repeat from memory “the greater part of Dr. Watt’s Psalms and Hymns.” This he had learned without the help of his private tutor, the Reverend Samuel Wood. The task of the latter was to teach Latin to Webster who gratefully acknowledged the help of “that most benevolent and excellent man” who “put me upon Virgil and Tully.”¹⁴

Much later, in 1844, Webster, now in the Senate, argued against a restriction in a will left by Stephen Girard to establish a college for poor orphan boys in Philadelphia. The restriction enjoined ecclesiastics, missionaries, and ministers “of any sect whatever . . . to hold or exercise any station of duty” within the college. Girard’s stated motive was “to keep the tender minds of the orphans . . . from the excitement which clashing doctrines and sectarian controversy are apt to produce.”¹⁵ Girard feared the effects of polemic divinity on children whose reason remained immature. Webster, in opposing this proviso, insisted that the great truths of Christianity were embraced by all Americans and that to attack the clergy as divisive was an old infidel ploy. But the image of a unified Christian republic was in the terms employed by Webster believable to very few, and the Supreme Court, including Joseph Story—who could normally be counted on to be sympathetic to any appeal suggesting that the United States was a Christian republic—ruled unanimously against Webster. Webster’s

12. Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, vol. 1, *The Formative Years, 1822–1852* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 100, 102, 105.

13. Letter to John Hull Olmsted, 19 June 1846, in McLaughlin, *Papers of Olmsted*, 1: 246.

14. Walker Lewis, ed., *Speak for Yourself, Daniel: A Life of Webster in His Own Words* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 5, 7, 10. The image of children learning to read the Bible at a very young age under the tutelage of their mother is almost a narrative formula in memoirs of antebellum life. Compare Webster, for example, to Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1868), 41–47.

15. *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster* (Boston: Little Brown, 1903), 11: 137.

performance was in fact an example of polemic divinity in action, however weakened in this case by being placed in the service of Webster's political ambitions.¹⁶ In the Girard case the opposing sides both addressed a culture in which disagreements about religion began in childhood. How then to treat orphan boys, as young as six, who had no families to take them to church and Sunday school, became an issue that reached the nation's highest tribunal.

II. RELIGIOUS QUESTIONING: THE CONTINUUM FROM CHILDHOOD TO INTELLECTUAL MATURITY

Most nineteenth-century Americans with claims to learning were conventional people of faith who went to church. In understanding the formation of intellectual communities in nineteenth-century America, it is especially important to stress that religion's intellectual quickening power was just as important to post-Civil War Americans whose adult minds veered toward nonbelief. Americans grew up in a world where, for better or worse, they encountered religion as what William James termed a living, forced, and momentous option.¹⁷ Whatever their adult churchgoing habits, religion was not a subject they had passed by with indifference.

The importance of religion to intellectual formation thus stands in bold relief if one looks at examples of Americans who as adults were not conventionally pious, who in fact developed a strong dislike for most forms of organized Christianity. The intellectual development of even the profoundest skeptics began with struggles to argue themselves out of religious faith. What needs elaboration is that nineteenth-century agnostics, in contrast to many contemporary nonbelievers, did not sharply separate themselves from the central concerns of a religious-minded culture but stayed committed to an ongoing dialogue with religion. Religion engaged their minds in a serious way and continued to shape the way they talked about vital issues, regardless of where they came down on those issues. Thus, while many nineteenth-century agnostics asserted that it was wonderfully liberating to cast off belief in God, such liberation only had significance because they had once believed in God and also believed that something had been risked in daring to throw belief aside.¹⁸

16. Robert V. Remini, *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 589–91.

17. This theme recurs in James, but the most famous exposition of "live," "forced," and "momentous" options is James's 1896 essay, "The Will to Believe."

18. The space for examples is limited and I have not tried to examine the nineteenth-century American writers who at a young age argued their way from traditional faith to religious

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's life spanned most of the nineteenth century. Born in 1815, Stanton's memories of her early exposure to religion are extremely negative. In the first place, religion tainted the relationship between herself and her parents: "Our parents were as kind, indulgent, and considerate as the Puritan ideas of those days permitted, but fear, rather than love, of God and parents alike, predominated."¹⁹ The pall cast by religion was in part remembered as physical discomfort: "So when the thermometer was twenty degrees below zero on the Johnstown Hills, we trudged along through the snow, foot stoves in hand, to the cold hospitalities of the 'Lord's House.' " But to a much greater degree, the suffering was mental. As a young girl Stanton lay awake at night tormented by terrible visions of Inferno. "I can truly say, after an experience of seventy years, that all the cares and anxieties, the trials and disappointments of my whole life, are light, when balanced with my sufferings in childhood and youth from the theological dogmas which I sincerely believed, and the gloom connected with everything associated with the name of religion, the church, the parsonage, the graveyard, and the solemn, tolling bell."²⁰

Stanton attended Emma Willard's school in Troy, New York, where she recalled, in her autobiography, a significant visit of the famous revivalist Charles Finney to the school while he was conducting a "protracted [six-week] meeting in Rev. Dr. Beaman's church." She went, and as she put it her "gloomy Calvinistic training" plus the daily prayer and religious pressures in the school made her one of the first victims of Finney's onslaught. For a time—an unfortunate time in her mind—"our studies . . . held a subordinate place to the more important duty of saving our souls." Stanton in later life was no friend of the idea of combining grammar school education with religious instruction. For her, religion was intellectually crippling. It blocked the curiosity of the mind and turned young people into intellectual cowards, afraid to voice their grievances. Perhaps, although that was not the effect of the far-from-dull Finney upon her. The terror his sermons produced in her "seriously influenced my character" and prompted puzzling questions about God's arbitrary ways that she put directly to Finney.²¹

One of the people who received the kindest treatment in her

doubt but who made their lifelong quarrels with faith an important theme of their fiction and poetry. Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickinson are obvious examples, but so is Twain. See generally Alfred Kazin, *God and the American Writer* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

19. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1897* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1898), 4, 25.

20. Stanton, *Eighty Years*, 24–25.

21. Stanton, *Eighty Years*, 41–42.

memoirs was a neighbor, the Reverend Simon Hosack. Hosack, Scots Presbyterian though he was, became Stanton's first example of the right uses of learning, learning not subservient to dogmatic theology. He taught her Greek and Latin, but in addition, she wrote, "I was his chosen companion in his parish rounds. His habit of using expressions beyond my years and then explaining them to me was one of the earliest influences on my intellectual development, and some of the rare phrases with which he besprinkled his conversation have always abided with me and did not a little to awaken in my young and receptive brain a taste for rhetoric." She does not mention theology as a subject of these parish walks, but Stanton's biblical literacy was solid, as she often revealed. On a visit with her family to Schenectady, she stayed at the Given's Hotel, whose dining room was illustrated with scenes from "sacred history." She and her sisters dashed around the room gleefully identifying the subjects.²²

Stanton's memoirs reveal clearly that religious controversy was the launchpad of her intellectual independence. Nothing else engaged her, enraged her, and enlivened her young mind in the same way. In that sense she was no different from Richard Ely or Frances Willard. The difference lay in her conclusions. She recalls an afternoon when, in looking out the nursery window, her Scottish nurse, a stern Presbyterian, suggested that in her idle reflections she must be "planning some new form of mischief." Stanton retorted sharply that "I was wondering why it was that everything we like to do is a sin, and that everything we dislike is commanded by God or someone on earth. I am so tired of that everlasting no! no! no! . . . I suppose God will say 'no' to all we like in the next world."²³ It was the arbitrary will of the God of the fathers, not her youthful sense that she was mistreated because she was a girl, that started her thinking about injustice.

Once these rebellious doubts had begun, logic formed a slippery slope away from any loyalty to an arbitrary divinity. However, for Stanton to slide down it with success, she needed to develop a strong will. "Thanks to a vigorous constitution and overflowing animal spirits, I was able to endure for years the strain of these depressing [religious] influences, until my reasoning powers and common sense triumphed at last over my imagination." That iron discipline was in any case Protestant to the core. Stanton moved away from Christianity, not via Darwinian naturalism, but via the intellectual world of Franz

22. Theodore Stanton and Harriet Stanton Blatch, eds., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922), 1: 18 ff.; Stanton, *Eighty Years*, 28.

23. Stanton, *Eighty Years*, 10–11.

Joseph Gall, Johann Spurzheim, and George Combe, Europeans who introduced Americans to phrenology and whose views became part of the religious controversies of antebellum America. For Stanton, these "liberal" works offered a rational argument against the old theologies and the "intellectual labyrinth of 'the Fall of Man,' 'Original Sin,' 'Total Depravity,' " and the rest of the dogmas of Calvinism. "I found my way out of the darkness into the clear sunlight of Truth. My religious superstitions gave place to rational ideas based on scientific facts, and in proportion, as I looked at everything from a new standpoint, I grew more and more happy."²⁴ However she put the matter, Stanton was still arguing about religious influences she could reject but not escape.

The feminism that Stanton is remembered for stayed well in advance of that of most of the other women who supported suffrage in the nineteenth century. Nothing better illustrated that fact than her determination to publish the *Woman's Bible*. Its first installment appeared in 1895. The American Woman's Suffrage Association formally voted to disassociate itself from this attempt to make plain the irrelevancies and contradictions, "the superstitions," of the Judaic Christian Scripture. Stanton harked back to Thomas Paine. When Scripture did not make sense by the light of her reason and when scriptural passages stood in the way of the establishment of human rights, Scripture must give way. This attitude began with a child who lay awake protesting to herself a God who did not make sense. In the end, Stanton's *Woman's Bible* was neither an exercise in atheistic scandalmongering nor an attempt to consign the Bible to the dustbin. It was an attempt to rewrite the Bible so that it could remain a source of fundamental moral instruction and insight, and the beginning of a liberated life of the mind.

A second example of the intellectual quickening power of religion on someone who finally rejected theism is provided by William Graham Sumner, who was born in 1840. Sumner's fame in American history rests upon his distinguished academic career as one of the first university people to call himself a sociologist. His appointment at Yale in 1872 as a professor of political and social science provided a platform for this inspiring teacher to champion Darwinian ideas, scientific empiricism, and laissez-faire. His agnosticism and his outspokenness against business plutocrats who sought favors from government to aid their operations more than once got him into trouble with the conservative trustees and President Noah Porter, who together ruled Yale.

The beginnings were different. Sumner's father was a self-educated

24. Stanton, *Eighty Years*, 26, 43–44.

workingman who was solid in all his habits, including his religious behavior. His faith was staunchly Episcopal, and his sons received clear religious directives. Sumner later recalled that he and his brothers awoke on Sunday morning to "condole with each other" about the prospects of a "dull day" devoted to religion, but Sumner's rebellion against religion proceeded far more slowly than in Stanton's case.²⁵ Sumner's religious piety was formed at home and in his contact with the Reverend Elias Beadle to whom his father assigned him specifically for religious instruction. The Reverend Beadle lured Sumner briefly away from Episcopalianism into the Congregational Church. Sumner's first early exposure to religious controversy came in learning to resist Unitarianism, Emersonianism, Transcendentalism, and "Romantic religion in general."²⁶ Later, back in the Episcopal Church, Sumner became an ordained deacon and then priest. In 1869 he served as assistant to the rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City, and from 1870 until 1872 he was rector of the Church of the Redeemer in Morristown, New Jersey. He had prepared for this career in the ministry first at Yale College and then in Germany and at Oxford. The German program of study had worried his father, who wrote to his son about the dangers of a fall from orthodoxy: "Apply your own rule as you applied it to the Universalist church when I asked you about going one Sunday night. You then thought it best to avoid any place of doubtful reputation."²⁷

The father proved to be right in his worries about Germany, but not for the reasons he imagined. Sumner heaped extravagant praise on the theological training, the training in "biblical science," he received on the continent. "I have heard men elsewhere talk about the nobility of that spirit [of truth]; but the only body of men whom I have ever known who really lived by it, sacrificing wealth, political distinction, church preferment, popularity, or anything else for the truth, were the professors of biblical science in Germany. . . . They . . . taught me rigorous and pitiless methods of investigation and deduction. . . . Their method of study was nobly scientific, and was worthy to rank, both for its results and its discipline, with the best of the natural science methods."²⁸ The intellectual interests of Sumner's boyhood reshaped themselves in the university, but he was not done yet with adjustments in personal belief forced by religious argument.

Sumner's career trouble began when he found few enthusiasts for a

25. Bruce Curtis, *William Graham Sumner* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 26.

26. Curtis, *Sumner*, 32.

27. Curtis, *Sumner*, 15.

28. "Sketch of Sumner," in *Essays of William Graham Sumner*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller and Maurice Davie (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1969), 2: 6.

rigorous pursuit of religious truth back in the United States ("everyone was afraid of it"), perhaps because it led, as he himself never quite admitted, to the eradication of traditional faith and the last traces of theism. Be that as it may, Sumner held onto rigorous standards for truth influenced by his early training and matured in contact with German theology. If he could not apply them in a church career in the United States, he could apply the intellectual discipline to another field of inquiry.

At Oxford, where he went after he left Germany, he found many attractive features of old Anglicanism and studied with pleasure and profit Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, written in 1594: "It suited exactly those notions of constitutional order, adjustments of rights, constitutional authority, and historical continuity, in which I had been brought up, and it presented those doctrines of liberty under law applied both to church and state which commanded my enthusiastic acceptance."²⁹ In the end, his religious training in Europe awakened his "love for political science."

The easy gloss of Sumner's intellectual development stresses a break. Leaving the church, Sumner locked away his religious opinions in a drawer. When he opened the drawer later after his conversion to Social Darwinism, those opinions had vanished with all traces of Bible-based morality. The sermons that Sumner delivered in Morristown, New Jersey, attacked individualism as breeding jealousy and selfishness and advocated a mutualistic ethic of human brotherhood celebrating the solidarity of the human race. These themes disappeared in Sumner's later laissez-faire polemical tracts. He abandoned not only Christian theism but Jefferson's view that Nature's God had endowed his creatures with inalienable rights. Sumner's Nature gave human beings nothing except, on an unequal basis, the physical and mental tools that they might call upon in a struggle to prove themselves fit to survive.

Yet Sumner's career exemplifies how in the nineteenth century early childhood exposure to religious training encouraged the asking of questions, even though at the outset he stuck to conventional answers. An early intellectual stimulus, crucially matured in Sumner's case by theological training that emphasized logic, doubt, and language study, excited and shaped an intellectual life, even after the religious ideas themselves were abandoned. In fact, this case of rootedness in religious culture is even more complex. In addition to an ethical commitment to hard work, Sumner carried through his years in New Haven the moral strictness of his earlier religious opinions. However much

29. "Sketch of Sumner," in Keller and Davie, *Essays*, 2: 7.

his path into the social sciences came by thinking his way through and out of his theistic faith, Sumner clung to a timeless moral code stressing "industry, temperance, prudence, and frugality." Perhaps fittingly, Sumner never resigned from the priesthood, he baptized one of his grandsons, and he took Communion not long before his last illness.

Although with respect to the nineteenth century it would be rash generalization to suggest that every person who emerged in later life as an intellectual was awakened to the life of the mind by religion and encouraged in that path at some point by religious controversy, among those who went into university teaching in the last half of the century, perhaps especially those who staffed the new social science departments, the number was substantial.³⁰ Nonbelievers and so-called freethinkers shared with Christian intellectuals in the nineteenth century a casual interest in discussing what are to moderns arcane issues of religious dogma. That common preoccupation created an intellectual style that gave fame to the agnostic speeches of Robert Ingersoll, who was the son of a Presbyterian minister. Nonbelief did not reflect religious indifference or a reluctance to talk about religion. Doubt about the existence of God was a subject broached with monumental seriousness.

Thus, over the course of the nineteenth century, ministers might have lost their place as America's most significant learned class without disturbing the fact, at least not immediately, that serious thinking in nineteenth-century America remained closely tied to thinking about religion. That interest guaranteed religion a place in American higher education. The completely secular intellectual, one who had never as a child given a thought to hellfire, who could discuss religion in an utterly detached way as if religious forms and pronouncements did not matter, was hard to come by. It is not as easy as it sounds to distinguish secular from religious outlooks, even if one is convinced that among intellectuals in the late nineteenth century the latter gave way steadily to the former.

Take the case of Andrew Dickson White, a post-Civil War university president who figures prominently in histories outlining the seculariza-

30. Albion Small, who founded the University of Chicago's sociology department, was the son of a Baptist minister and had a degree from Newton Theological Seminary. He founded the *American Journal of Sociology* with two of his colleagues: George E. Vincent, vice chancellor of the Chautauqua Association and son of the Methodist bishop who cofounded it, and Charles Richmond Henderson who was for twenty years a Baptist pastor before coming to Chicago.

tion of American higher education.³¹ To his critics, he was responsible for creating Cornell University as a godless institution and for championing the notion that normative religious instruction and compulsory religious worship had no place on the college campus. Worse, he was a Darwinian who wrote the two-volume *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*. Such a man, who shoved religion aside when it got in the way of education, surely exemplified the coming of the intellectual who could live comfortably "without god and without creed."³²

To regard White as a man of only residual religious feeling, however, misses the importance of religion in creating his intellectual world. Some old biases simply never went away. White was latitudinarian in his religious views and also a rather stuffy member of the Protestant Episcopal Church. He was open-minded about a university but traditional about many matters of church music and ritual. He stated that it would be a "sad day" for Americans "when men, instead of meeting their fellow-men in assemblages for public worship which give them a sense of brotherhood, shall lounge at home or in clubs; when men and women, instead of bringing themselves at stated periods into an atmosphere of prayer, praise, and aspiration, . . . shall stay at home and give their thoughts to the Sunday papers."³³

What makes White's account of his early intellectual development similar to that of many other nineteenth-century Americans, whatever religion they settled upon as adults, is the way he recalled the religious disputes that excited him in his youth. How many people of the late twentieth century would recall as a "famous controversy" of childhood the comment of a Presbyterian minister who insisted that Americans had founded a "church without a bishop and a state without a king." For the Episcopal-reared White, such an audacious statement set him in boyish battle "in behalf of high-church ideas with various Presbyterian boys, and especially with the son of the Presbyterian pastor."³⁴ White's adult mind was well stocked with religious opinions that were the responsibility of all civilized men and women to form.

For many of America's other university presidents academic leader-

31. The story of university secularization is told in George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

32. James Turner, *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 166, observes correctly enough that White found his "religious beliefs slipping away" in the 1850s and settled into "a cheerfully undoctinal faith in God." My point is simply that there is something important to note about this process other than a corrosive "unsettlement of Christianity."

33. *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (New York: Century, 1905), 2: 565–66, 570.

34. *Autobiography of White*, 2: 517–18.

ship was one way to carry through a religious mission. Noah Porter, Yale's president from 1871 to 1886, was a minister. John Bascom, the president of the University of Wisconsin from 1874–1887, studied at both Auburn Theological Seminary and Andover Theological Seminary. Daniel Coit Gilman, president of the University of California and later of Johns Hopkins, also almost chose the ministry as a career and was in fact licensed to preach by the Congregationalist New Haven Central Association. James Angell turned away from the ministry and toward the presidencies of the University of Vermont and the University of Michigan only after being told that a throat ailment made him poorly suited for a career involving public speaking. William Rainey Harper, the University of Chicago's first president, was a biblical scholar. Woodrow Wilson's minister-father often takes the blame for the son's stubborn idealism at Princeton and in the White House. Charles Eliot's father was a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School and warden of King's Chapel, whose minister became young Eliot's father-in-law. To all of these men, even if they cut ties of their institutions to religious denominations and changed curricula to reflect the rising prestige of science, education was a religious vocation.³⁵

One can collect endless vignettes from the lives of American Victorian intellectuals to illustrate how they, whatever their careers, took almost childish delight in religious controversy. That some seem comic to us signifies our distance from the past. Asa Gray, the botanist at Harvard who championed Darwinian principles of natural selection without being thrown off his habit of constant churchgoing, sat locked in conversation one Sunday afternoon with John Carey over whether the Ten Commandments were binding upon Christians irrespective of whether they had been "re-ordained" by the church. Gray argued against the "extreme church view." According to the observer, both Carey and Gray were excited but Gray showed "his excitement . . . by moving or jumping nervously about the room, sitting on the floor, lying down flat, but laughing and sending sparks out of his eyes, and plying his arguments and making his witty thrusts all the while."³⁶ Gray may have been eccentric, but the spirit he demonstrated in pursuing religious discussions was not unusual.

35. In 1890 Angell estimated that at state universities 71 percent of the faculty belonged to churches and that many of the rest were actively religious. See Bradley Longfield, "From Evangelicalism to Liberalism: Public Midwestern Universities in Nineteenth-Century America," in *The Secularization of the Academy*, ed. Bradley Longfield and George Marsden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55.

36. Jane Loring Gray, ed., *Letters of Asa Gray* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 1: 321–23.

III. CODA: POLEMICAL RELIGION AND PUBLIC GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

The exchange between Carey and Gray took place when religious controversy was still one of America's chief public entertainments. In the early 1830s the freethinking Robert Owen and the Scotland-born founder of the Disciples of Christ, Alexander Campbell, entertained crowds in the thousands with extended debates about the merits of their belief.³⁷ Pamphlet literature of the antebellum period makes clear the interest that Americans, often gathered in family groups, took in attending similar forums. By the end of the century the forums that sponsored the airing of lively religious controversy were disappearing. Indicative of a different spirit was the World's Parliament of Religions held in 1893 at the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Many American religious figures gathered in peaceful assembly with leaders of other world faiths ostensibly with the purpose of learning from one another. There were no debates, only cordial hearings and subsequent lecture tours for leading proponents of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Figures on church membership in America remained high and university faculty members in the early part of the twentieth century were as religious as the rest of middle-class Americans. Yet many American intellectuals, influenced by Progressive calls for professionalism and dispassionate expertise, adopted postures of cosmopolitanism that much reduced the value of having, or at least of expressing, strong religious opinions.³⁸ Many Protestant leaders continued to view Catholics (who had boycotted the World's Parliament of Religions) and Jews with hostility, but their distaste focused less on belief than on behavior. The shift was neither abrupt nor total, but it did over time create different childhoods for many twentieth-century Americans. As children heard their parents and their neighbors argue less about divinity, they in fact came to know less about religion.

But what about the public schools, which many people still cite as institutions that introduced nineteenth-century children to the subject of religion and made it part of their daily lives? The image of the one-room schoolhouse where pious schoolmasters put the fear of God in children informs many contemporary school disputes, with both sides accepting the image as historically accurate. The material we have been discussing suggests the need for some rethinking. What is striking about the lives we have recounted, and the way many nine-

37. Frances Trollope, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; reprint, London: Century, 1984), 121–26.

38. David Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," in *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

teenth-century Americans remembered religion as important to their intellectual development, is how rarely their autobiographies attribute an early interest in religion to early schooling, whether in public schools or private academies or even the rooms of clergy-tutors. Classroom religion is not an absent subject. It is simply not prominent compared to other ways religion became significant to children. One thing that is never mentioned as something associated with public schools is religion as a subject of controversy, as something to debate as part of classroom instruction.

The absence of references to the importance of classroom religion should not surprise us, and not merely because many nineteenth-century children had little formal schooling. Before children started to attend school, they had time to chafe at religious discipline, to wrestle with questions of salvation, and to reach some conclusions. The truth was that religion was so much more interesting in forums other than school. The religion that became part of the school day in nineteenth-century America was not meant to provoke argument or, as Thomas Jefferson had warned against, to invite religious inquiries. Quite aside from Jefferson's pedagogical views, common schools, if they were to be public, had no other choice but to seek to avoid controversy.

Horace Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837 to 1848, had more influence than anyone else in shaping what constituted classroom religion, where it existed at all, in nineteenth-century grammar schools. He championed a Protestant version of nonsectarian religious practice, "general Christianity," in the public schools of his state. His opponents were unreconstructed New England ministers of the old Calvinist persuasion, not Unitarians like Mann, who argued that if schools abandoned dogmatic religious instruction contained in the *New England Primer* and in the Westminster Catechism, children would grow up as wild animals. They stingingly declared that "general religion" in the public schools would be tepid, a weak thing "that infidels might believe, and sensualists applaud."³⁹

However, Mann followed the Massachusetts law of 1827 that forbade classroom instruction favoring one religious sect over another. True, Mann and many others had difficulty in understanding why classroom reading from the King James Version of the Bible made Catholics angry. Mann also strongly favored the use of the Reverend William Holmes McGuffey's famous readers, which, in the antebellum era, contained biblical passages as well as lessons that epitomized

39. Michael Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 145.

Mann's notions of general Christian principles.⁴⁰ Still, there were ways to accommodate Catholic schoolchildren so long as everyone agreed that the purpose of classroom religion was, as Mann had emphasized, piety and discipline, not the framing of intellectual inquiry.

Mann's ideas proved popular in other states, and many champions of public education argued the benefits of using Bible reading and, less commonly, school prayer to start the school day. What this position gave up, and gave up without a struggle, was an effort to put religion in the curriculum as an academic subject. This fact places in perspective the outraged cries of educators who later in the nineteenth century protested some decisions that discontinued altogether the use of the Bible in public school classrooms. In 1874, for example, Catharine Beecher attacked "leading editors of religious papers and clergymen" who to Beecher's dismay advocated that the Bible "be ejected from our public schools." She insisted that "*school instruction in morality and religious principles may be given without trenching upon doctrinal or debatable grounds.*"⁴¹

What is important here is that by the time Beecher wrote, the use of the Bible meant reading a few verses at the beginning of the school day. It was extracurricular. The Bible was not a textbook, and as Beecher herself said, it was not to appear in a context that raised a debate. Mann's prescriptions had become normative for her and for everyone else who defended classroom religion. The Bible was for discipline and good morals. One educator's list of the fruits of Bible reading was typical in what it included and in what it omitted. It included "honesty, general benevolence, public and private charity, industry, economy, honesty, punctuality, sincerity, sobriety, and all social and generous sentiments."⁴² It omitted thinking.

To remember this substantial degree of secularization of the grammar schools in the nineteenth century does not render meaningless the debates that remained about the content of school devotional exercises and the appropriateness of the King James Bible for use among Catholic schoolchildren.⁴³ But it does underscore that classroom religion in the nineteenth century had little to do with what has been discussed in this article—the importance of polemics in making religion an exciting subject to very young children and in shaping the

40. Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 67.

41. Catharine Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1874), 250 (emphasis in original).

42. From the report of U.S. Commissioner of Education, reprinted in *American Journal of Education* 25 (1876): xxxv.

43. Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 63 ff.

intellectual habits carried through life. Public grammar schools in the nineteenth century were becoming important institutions, but they were not the reason that religion mattered to young children.

Some nineteenth-century educators recognized this fact and tried to suggest another pedagogical perspective to reformulate ideas about classroom religion, one that presented religion to children as a serious subject but not a settled or dogmatic one. William Graham Sumner, for example, although he did not view the public schools as a way to revive his culture's fading interest in "polemic divinity," viewed what passed as religious instruction in the grammar schools of his day as largely irrelevant for academic purposes. In fact, to conduct didactic religious exercises as some brief and ritual prelude to rigorous instruction in secular academic subjects only made religion look bad. In a church journal he wrote: "Shall we teach children to do certain things because the teacher commands them, and not to do others because they are forbidden; or shall we teach them to think and see for themselves?"⁴⁴ If classroom religious exercises did not encourage children to pursue truth with an independent spirit, if they did not encourage questions, then it did them no good. Elizabeth Cady Stanton most emphatically agreed.

G. Stanley Hall, the American psychologist who became president of Clark University, also complained that classroom religion in America did little to make schoolchildren care about religion or to be curious about it. He blamed public schools for allowing America to become the most backward country "in the Protestant world as regards intelligent historical and literary study of the Bible." In consequence, "with the development of secular education, there has grown in every land an increase in divorce in which this country leads. . . . We lead in homicides. . . . The percentage of juvenile crime is rising, hoodlumism, general feralization of youth."⁴⁵

For the most part Hall was blaming the wrong institution for what he viewed as waning religious literacy. To insist on "using" schools "to enforce and strengthen moral obligation"⁴⁶ was all along an attitude that had reduced religion to calculated social policy and was in that sense a reinforcement of the secularization that Hall and others feared was spreading in American culture. Hall at least recognized that unless religion became a subject of instruction in the grammar schools

44. "The Public School Question," *Living Church* 1 (1870): 133–35; "The Study of the Bible," *Living Church* 1 (1870): 182–84.

45. G. Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems* (New York: D. Appleton, 1911), 1: 151, 197.

46. The words of a school superintendent in 1894 quoted in David Tyack, "Onward Christian Soldiers," in *History and Education: The Educational Uses of the Past*, ed. Paul Nash (New York: Random House, 1970), 223.

in the same way that reading and arithmetic were subjects of instruction, it would not amount to much. The problem was that given the general heterogeneity of America's school population, combined with the jealousies of various religious groups who found something objectionable in virtually any religious instruction with content, American public school educators had no choice but to follow the strategies that they did. What grammar schools taught was not supposed to make children wonder whether newborn infants went to hell, whether the doctrine of the Trinity made sense, or whether the Garden of Eden was a real place. And yet these remained important questions to many nineteenth-century children.

Public grammar schools then played no primary role in making religion important to the intellectual awakening of nineteenth-century Americans. And though the schools were largely secular by design, they were not the reason religion eventually played less of a role in American intellectual life over the course of the twentieth century. If fewer children spent sleepless nights worrying about God's ways, or, if they did, stopped wondering about them by the time they left for college, the world was bound to change. William T. Harris, who headed the public schools of St. Louis before becoming the United States commissioner of education, tried to assign responsibility correctly. He said that trying to make grammar schools responsible for the health of religion was a misplaced burden: "The church management must not rest in security on the belief that the time is coming when it may safely rely on an unsectarian instruction in the elementary schools for the spread of true religion."⁴⁷ Children once cared about religion as an intellectual matter because it seemed an important thing to argue about. Their world was steeped in polemic divinity. As that became less true, polemic divinity could no longer do the intellectual work it had done for a young, protesting Benjamin Franklin.

47. Quoted in Tyack, "Onward Christian Soldiers," 226.